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Alligences

B L I Z Z A R D C L A N

L E A D E R

Shiverstar- Light grey tom flecked with white, blue eyes.

D E P U T Y

Pinedrift- Dark brown she-cat, green eyes.

M E D I C I N E C A T

Hollystorm- Dark brown she-cat, green eyes. Twin sister of Pinedrift.

APPRENTICE, CLOUDPAW

M E D I C I N E A P P R E N T I C E

Cloudpaw- White tom, amber eyes.

S K Y S P E A K E R

[This cat has the gift to tell the weather. They are selected by StarClan and cannot change their destiny. Even though their predictions are usually right, they sometimes make mistakes, although seldom. They also receive prophecies like leaders or medicine cats, and may not have a mate. They must take the suffix Gaze.]

Lichengaze- Light grey tom with white patches, jade eyes.

W A R R I O R S

Frosttalon- White she-cat, blue eyes.

Galefeet- Fast light grey tom with black speckles, blue eyes.

APPRENTICE, LARCHPAW

Sneezenose- White she-cat, green eyes. Always has a cold.

Birchpelt- White she-cat with black stripe markings, green eyes.

APPRENTICE, HORIZONPAW

Ravenfall- Black tom, blue eyes.

Tigercloud- White she-cat with black stripes, blue eyes.

Palestreak- Grey she-cat with a white stripe down her back, blue eyes.

APPRENTICE, CROOKEDPAW

Coldwhisker- White tom, green eyes.

Speck- Young grey tom with speckled with white, blue eyes. Formerly loner.

Whitepetal- White she-cat, pale green eyes. Considered very beautiful.

APPRENTICE, DAPPLEPAW

A P P R E N T I C E S

Horizonpaw- White she-cat, amber eyes.

Larchpaw- Light grey tom, green eyes.

Dapplepaw- White she-cat, speckled with grey, yellow eyes flecked with tawny.

Crookedpaw- Light-grey tom, pale green eyes.

Q U E E N S

Shallowpool- White she-cat, pale blue eyes. Mates with Galefeet.

Brooktail- White she-cat, green eyes. Mates with Ravenfall.

K I T S

Shallowpool's litter:

Icekit- White tom, blue eyes.

Sleetkit- Light grey she-kit, blue eyes.

Wishkit- White she-kit with black speckles, pale blue eyes.

Brooktail's litter:

Swallowkit- Black tom, green eyes.

Tulipkit- White she-kit, green eyes.

E L D E R S

Clearsky- Blind, old she-cat, grey fur and clouded eyes.

Snowfoot- Ancient grey tom with one white foot, green eyes.

A L L E Y C L A N

L E A D E R

Smokestar- Fiesty dark grey she-cat, amber eyes.

D E P U T Y

Ironpelt- Light grey/white tom, yellow eyes.

M E D I C I N E C A T

Raggedsteps- Tawny tom, amber eyes.

M E D I C I N E A P P R E N T I C E

Cobblepaw- Grey tom, green eyes.

S K Y S P E A K E R

Rustedgaze- Ginger tom, copper eyes.

W A R R I O R S

Yellowjaws- Ginger tom with yellowing teeth, yellow eyes.

Scarface- Black tom, scar across his face, yellow eyes.

APPRENTICE, HISSPAW

Halfsight- Grey she-cat with one blind eye, one green eye.

Fumecough- Ginger she-cat, green eyes.

Dirtclaws- Brown tom, brown eyes.

Longpath- Grey she-cat, light brown eyes.

APPRENTICE, HIDINGPAW

Draggingsnarl- Ginger tom, yellow eyes.

Dusty- Dusty-brown she-cat, blue eyes. Former rogue.

Wearypelt- Brown she-cat, brown eyes.

Runningstreet- Dark brown/black she-cat, yellow eyes.

APPRENTICE, THISTLEPAW

Crumblefall- Grey she-cat, blue eyes.

Cloudedgleam- White tom, cloudy blue eyes.

Fallen- Black tom, yellow eyes. Former rouge.

Nightchaser- Black she-cat, yellow eyes.

APPRENTICE, SCATTERPAW

Deepwail- Brown tom, blue eyes.

Slowtrudge- Grey tom, green eyes.

A P P R E N T I C E S

Scatterpaw- Brown she-cat, green eyes.

Hidingpaw- Brown tom, green eyes.

Hisspaw- Ginger tom, blue eyes.

Thistlepaw- Grey she-cat, green eyes.

Q U E E N S

Bittersnap- Cream she-cat, green eyes.

Sharpbreeze- Black she-cat, blue eyes. Expecting an estimated three kits.

K I T S

Bittersnap's litter

Dimkit- Dull brown tom, murky green eyes.

Sighkit- Cream she-kit, green eyes.

E L D E R S

Due to AlleyClan's constant fighting, moving, running and vigilance, the older cats are sadly exiled from the Clan- or killed if they wish to die with their Clanmates. There are no elders.

A/N
I don't really know what to say... Welcome to the book, I guess! I want to keep a serious mood for the book so I won't do many A/Ns. Please enjoy reading!

H U M I L I A T I O N

A haunting melody.

It echoes across the snow-frosted forest, stroking talons of ice down the bones of the sleeping cats. It teases our sharp ears, pricked even in slumber, by twirling through and round and up and out and back. It runs soft claws down our hearts, too shallow to spurt blood but deep enough to hurt. The low, carrying song is chilling and hostile. It would bring nightmares to one cat and beautiful dreams to another. For me, perched on the snowy branch of a tree with the stubbornly cold breeze prickling the skin under my white fur, it brings neutralness. I'm not sure what I feel. I've never been too sure, to be perfectly honest.

"Wishkit," the wind sighs. My pale, pale eyes narrow. The singing fades away.
What is it now, wind? I'm enjoying the night, I don't need your butting in.
"Sleep," the wind breathes as it shows off with flawless loops and swirls.
Enough with your dance, I refuse to rest. I want to breathe, breathe your cold air, I want to feel alive.
"Warmth."
I don't need it.
"Family."
Don't want it.
"Safety."
What's life without a little risk?
"Go, kit."
"Why should I?" I mutter aloud.
"Tonight is not safe."
I'm terrified. Oh no, is a kit-tale dragon going to give a scary roar?
"No joking around, kit."
Really? I didn't expect that!
The wind gives a large huff of frustration and I almost topple from my perch.

Careful, you stubborn mousebrain! I scowl upwards at the empty night sky.

"Wishkit! What in StarClan's name are you doing up there?"

I whip my little snowy head around.
"Get down right now!" Crookedpaw, an apprentice with the temper of a badger, glares at me from the ground. "Lichengaze predicted a blizzard and you know full well you're not to leave the nursery!"
"I was just watching the stars. The night's clear, the old tom must've been wrong." *As usual.* "And who made you the deputy all of a sudden?"
"Has your colossal ego gotten the better of you get again, you selfless kit?" The apprentice snarls, a burning hatred in his eyes. "Get inside! Now! Before I call my mentor and your apprentice ceremony is suspended for another moon!"

"Fine," I sneer, leaping down from black branch to branch until my paws sink into the blanket of snow. We stand silently glaring at each other when I realise the singing has started again. Some of the venom fades from Crookedpaw's dark amber eyes as he listens. Maybe, just maybe, where the music brings neutralness to me, it brings peace and calmness to him. *He needs it*, I smirk inside.We stand there for a few minutes, as the mysterious voice that sings in an undeterminable language that I suspect to be badger. Who knows? Badgers are rare, and they sort of just burble anyway. It's too loud and full for a bird, too sweet for the dragging screech of a fox, and it's definitely not a cat. Is it a twoleg? I've heard tales brought back from long-past Gatherings with AlleyClan under the new moon, tales of twolegs singing in their odd voices. It's certainly no caterwaul. Maybe it's a creature I haven't heard of yet, in my 5 moons and 7 days of life. One could note I'm close to becoming an apprentice, but to be honest, I'm not looking forward to my ceremony. I don't want to embarrass myself or my mentor. Or my Clan, but it all depends, really.

"I'll ask Palestreak if she would kindly check out that *noise* at sunrise." Crookedpaw's snooty voice awakens my from my quiet reverie. Noise? That's the understatement of the moon. "Now get to the nursery, before I drag you by your scruff!"
"You wouldn't dare," I sneer, leaping to my feet in defiance.

"Oh, wouldn't I?"
"That's probably against the code. Isn't that a pity for poor Crookedpaw?" I stretch out teasingly, and flex my claws, yawning boredly.
"Oh yes, law-abiding, rule-loving Crookedpaw," he snaps. Before I know what's happening he grabs my scruff and drags me through the light blanket of snow. I yelp as the cold numbs the skin beneath my thick white fur. "Come, come, now it's beginning to snow!" Crookedpaw shouts back at me, enjoying every second.
"Get off, I can walk!" I snarl angrily at the long-furred apprentice. I writhe and slip about in the snow, trying desperately to loosen his grip.
"Then walk." He releases me. I leap up, give one last hiss at the sniggering apprentice now covered with fresh snowflakes, and pelt as fast as I can into the camp. I slide into the nursery, soaked and shaking.

"Damn it, Crookedpaw," I growl under my breath as I settle down next to my mother, "Damn you."

B E T R A Y A L

But tonight, there really is a blizzard, and a big one at that. The wind howls and tears at slender black branches, no longer the graceful show-off I bickered with. Despite my earlier claims that I didn't need my family, I find myself shrinking into my mother's long pelt. My soft, downy kit-fur is not yet thick enough to beat out the cold. And oh, is it cold, the air is practically frozen and the Nursery turns to ice overnight. My tiny jaws clatter and my body shivers uncontrollably. I try to shut my eyes but I'm so, so afraid that they'll freeze shut and I'll be blind forever. On the other hand, staring at the frost creeping over the bramble wall of the Nursery isn't nearly as fascinating as I'd thought it would be.

Two sides of my brain are clashing, sleep and fear, and there's nothing I can do. I'm beginning to get an awful headache when Shiverstar stumbles in, his tail stiff spikes of ice, shivering so hard I'm impressed he can stay on his paws. "The C-C-Clan... will be sh-sh-sh-sheltering..... in the c-c-cav-ve tonight-t-t!" he splutters, looking into my eyes. He nods and gallops bow-leggedly away. I begin prodding my mother will my small claw. It doesn't take long before she's up and alert. "Shiverstar... Blizzard... Cave!" I manage to get out from my frozen lungs. She nods. The ice frosting the tip of her nose is silver.

Soon, both Queens and their litters of kits are awake and ready. I look outside and see a screen of white. Panic hits me. Where's my camp, my forest, my territory? I've seen blizzards before, but this seems to be the worst one yet. We kits have only been the Cave once before, during a drill. The real thing is so much more terrifying, because the danger is right there, cackling down your neck and clouding your vision with fear. My heart pounds as I back into the freezing den and glance pleadingly at my mother. She shrugs. "Wishkit and Sleetkit will go first."
Sleetkit almost falls over with shock and I give a yowl of protest. "Mama, we don't know the way!"
"You should come too!"

"We could get lost out there!"
"We could *die!*"
"You need to lead us!"
"Please, don't make us!"
Even Brooktail is frowning at her as she ignores our protests with a simple shrug. Anger surges up inside me. Of course, it was just like her to not care! She's never given a damn about us anyway!

"I hate you!" I screech, pulling a shocked and terrified Sleetkit from the den and out into the solid white wall.

My sister tries to speak but snow fills her mouth and her words are snatched away. The freezing matter raining down on us is already coating out pelts and we can only stagger through the intense wind. Blindly, I try to set my mind straight. *If we've walked about a foxlength in a straight line, we're about a quarter of the way across the camp. So if we continue for another foxlength, we'd be almost half way across the camp. Then, we should turn... Right? Or left? Oh, yeah, it's at the base of Highrock! Then we turn right and continue for three foxlengths, through the camp. Who's idea was it to put the nursery on the edge?* I feel about for Sleetkit and pull her along with my teeth. I lean right up to her ear and speak as well as I can. "Follow me." My sister obeys and we plough on for about another foxlength. I turn right and Sleetkit copies me. At about one foxlength towards highrock, I realise I can't feel my legs.

I stagger, stumble, and eventually drag myself for the next foxlength. I'm jerking and spasming, it hurts so bad, and my head feels like it's filled with ice. I cough and water slides up from my throat. I'm drowning in snow, water, ice and sleet. I'm being buried alive! I can't breathe and have no strength to yowl for help. *We're going to be stuck here forever, an all they'll find is our bones.* I continue writhing through the second foxlength. But I've lost all sense of direction, I can't see or hear or think. *I'm so, so cold.* Sleetkit is gone into the great white wilderness. *Somebody help me! HELP!* I attempt a wail of warning but all I get is a soft cry and I collapse, frozen stiff and solid, into a biting blanket of snow.

Behind my eyelids is a black desert of nothingness. But before I can silently drift away, I hear a crack.

And them I'm falling, falling, falling.

H O N E S T Y

"Keep licking her, she's starting to come around!"

My eyelids slowly unstick and I pull my eyes open. They feel heavy and they ache awfully, but it's nothing compared to the rest of my pain. I strain to see, but all I can make out in the haze is a black silhouette looming above my face. I squeeze my eyes shut again, then open them. Some of the blindess leaves my vision and the black turns dark brown, forming Hollystorm, the medicine cat. Two piercing green eyes stare straight into my confused and clouded ones. Then, I feel the soft licking, on my tummy and paws. *Disgusting! I'm not a newborn kit!* I want to hiss and snarl, but I can't move for the pain. Terror siezes me and my eyelids shut again, blotting out the world.

When I finally regain my conciousness, Hollystorm is gone. I'm on my side and two blurry figures leer at me from the cave wall. Shiverstar... And my mother.
"That was quite a fall," Shiverstar murmurs to me, concern in his voice. My mother's eyes are far away, and I know she's thinking of her beloved kit. *Ice*kit. Who, as always, will be prim and perfect and uninjured and spotlessly clean. And mentally handicapped.

It's not uncommon for a mother to have a favourite in BlizzardClan. A mother forgetting the other two has happened before. I'm sure that even AlleyClan has a mother that neglected two kits and favourited the 'special' one. But it's happening to *me.* And I'm me! Call me selfish but I don't give a mouse's tail if some ordinary Warrior was abused by his mother. I'm Wishkit, do-er of dares, leader of adventures and opponent of the wind! I'm the strongest, eldest, bravest kit in the Nursery. Why does it have to be *me* who's unloved! Because unloved means pity, and pity means weakness, and weakness is not welcome here. Not in my Clan!

Shiverstar turns to my mother. "She was lucky to survive, Shallowpool." I stare up at her, but anger surges and I flicker my gaze down to the cave floor. *You never cared about me, did you? You*

wouldn't care if I was mauled to death by a wolf! My mother shrugs. "Stupid kit," she fires at me. I swish my tail, which I find I can move.
"When can I get up?" I say innocently, without the slightest hint of offence taken. The queen standing above me frowns.
"You twisted two ankles badly after that fall. One hind leg may be broken. But you also-"
"What about Sleetkit?"
"She's fine. She managed to climb safely into the Cave before she blacked out. When you fell, snow piled up on top of you. We're guessing it just got too heavy, because some ground collapsed. We heard the clatter of rock and thump of snow. You're very, very lucky some twigs built up halfway down slowed your fall. We found you on a ledge a little way from the ground." My leader lets it sink in. Shallowpool stalked off while he was talking. I don't care, but I'm in solem silence. *I was that close to meeting StarClan. I could've been crushed, suffocated, snapped into a million pieces. But I'm alive.*
"Were you saying something else before I asked about Sleetkit?" I say quietly.
"Yes," Shiverstar says sorrowfully. He bows his head. "You are developing greencough."
"Then what are you doing in here?" Horrified, I can already hear the croak entering my voice. "Leave!"
"I must say one more thing before I return to the rest of our Clan. You took some damage to your spine. Please, don't try to stand up or move. You're a promising warrior, Wishkit. Heal well." He nods and bounds away.

Pain absolutely smashes me, unlike any physical pain ever felt. It shatters my bones and leaves me stunned. Then it swings back, tearing apart my soul. Back and fourth, back and fourth, crushing and mushing me into a tiny puddle of agony and sorrow.

His words echo in my excruciatingly painful head. *Broken leg. Damage to your spine. Don't move.* And I, Wishkit, do-er of dares, leader of adventures and opponent of the wind, am forced to accept something I could never accept. I cannot become a warrior. I am a burden.

I am as useless as a single flake of snow.

A G O N Y

Get out, Sleetkit, I told you a million times! I don't want to talk to you and you're not allowed to be in here.

"Feeling any better, Wishkit?" My sister's snowy head peeks through the entrance to the Cave's medicine den, my new home. I'm freezing cold but my head is so hot and throbs awfully. I can hardly feel the pain in my broken legs, as my spine just so happens to be damaged which means I'm mostly numb. Mostly. Every so often, a searing pain rockets up my bone and I can't even scream. All I can do is make indistinguishable moans and lie still. I've lied still for three sunhighs, now. It seems like moons, seasons, forever. I don't have the strength to care, let alone complain. I'm going to die anyway, what's the point in a little more pain?

"Oh, Wishkit, I wish you'd hurry up healing! I want to show you the icicles. They're longer than badger's teeth!" Sleetkit rambles on and on. "Hollystorm said that if I dared to come in here she'd feed me to a real badger, but she's being silly. Stop being wimpy, come on, let's play! It's only-"
"Two broken legs, a damaged spine, concussion and greencough!"
Sleetkit jumps a foxlength, then turns to see a glaring Hollystorm.
"What did I tell you about coming in here?"
My sister seems to shrink as Hollystorm advances on her, furious.
"Well, I only wanted to say-"
"If I catch you in here *one more time,* I will ask my sister to delay your apprenticship. Leave now!"

Sleetkit glances it me with a look of sorrow, pleading and guilt. It's a look I've witnessed and felt many times. It's the look that says *I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?* It's the look I can't resist. So, I glare back with all my fire, frustration and anger, and gather up all my strength.

"Get.....out."

My throat burns and I burst into another unbearably painful

coughing fit, but it's worth it. It's all worth it to see the hurt in her eyes, the droop in her tail, the sag of her chest as she trudges away. Whatever. She'll get over it. She's Sleetkit: manipulater of warriors, maker of plans, my faithful deputy. Maybe when I finally heal enough the come up to the surface, I'll find her in my place. The leader of the apprentices. Maybe warriors, by then. And those cats will look at me, Wishkit, once the bigget, the bravest and the best, now just a useless broken burden who will never walk again, and they'll pity me. And a cat who is pitied is a coward and a wimp.

Hollystorm rushes to my flailing side, all set with the emergency stocks of herbs, catmint and feverfew among them. My head burns and I can hardly breathe for the pain. I'm so, so cold, but my long fur which is still not fully grown and thickened is not helping me at all.
"Don't....waste....the herbs....on me." I manage to force out the words between coughs and moans. "Shut that little mouth of yours, Wishkit! You're my patient, and I'll determine if you're a hopeless case or not, thank you very much. I don't give a mouse's tail if you think you're dying. You aren't a medicine cat, are you? Yet I am. We've cured greencough before, it's not like you're the first, so be quiet and choke down these herbs!" If I weren't dying slowly, painfully and horribly, I would find the medicine cat's sassy outburst amusing. Sadly, I'm in too much agony to appreciate her attiude, but maybe next time, hmm? If there is a next time, which, despite what Hollystorm says, is very unlikely. And, ha ha, let's face it, who wants to live as a crippled medicine cat? Because that's what I'm going to be. Like it or not, that's the only other path I can take.

Suprisingly, I survive another sunhigh. Sleetkit hasn't shown her stupid face, my mother doesn't care, Hollystorm's sassier than ever and I'm still dying slowly and steadily. And even if I don't die, I'll never be able to follow my dream of becoming a warrior.

StarClan, get me out of this hell!

R E C O V E R Y ?

It's so much quieter in my head. Soothing, sweet, and comfortable, it makes me want to laugh aloud.

My throat feels less like a twoleg building consumed by flames. I am not freezing cold and boiling hot at the same time, but a peaceful warm. The roar in my head is gone. I feel like I've been sent straight from StarClan: renewed and whole. Even the awful pain of not being able to be a Warrior has died down. I am going to have to accept my destiny.

"What made you suddenly so cheerful?" Hollystorm bustles through my small cave. "Do you have a sudden ambition to be a medicine cat that I've seemingly missed?"
"Nope, I still would rather live off grass and sleep in a pine tree than spend my life doling out leaves to sick cats. Which is the future you've mindlessly chosen." Hollystorm looks suprised. "But it is my destiny! And unless the past moon's antics can be rewritten, I will never be able to get around that! So I'm going to go with the cheesy old idiom and be the best medicine cat I can be, or something like that."
"StarClan forbid, I've begun to make an impression on you!" Hollystorm opens her eyes wide. I give a small titter. "Are you quite sure I haven't overdosed you on poppy seeds? Wishkit, laughing at something that isn't somebody else's misfortune, is almost unheard oh."
"Hey! That stung!"

* * *

I gaze at my sister, laughing along with the medicine cat at something she's said. My heart aches. *If I get her in this good mood,* I think desperately, *will she turn me away again?*

When we were little, we used to detest each other. I was friends with Brooktail's kit, Tulipkit, and Wishkit was friends with Tulipkit's brother, Swallowkit. *Wishkit and Swallowkit- the Daring Lovebirds.*

That's what Tulipkit and I used to call them. Wishkit's natural fearlessness and arrogance, combined with Swallowkit's intelligence and confidence, made a great team. In fact, I envied them. I wanted to be Wishkit. I wanted to be daring, fearless, arrogant and a natural leader.

It happened when we were playing AlleyClan. Wishkit was Smokestar, of course, and Swallowkit was Ironpelt. I was Crumblefall and Tulipkit was Nightchaser, two senior warriors. We were patrolling the 'woods' and a fight broke out over a 'mouse'. The next thing we knew, Swallowpelt and Wishkit were having a vicious fight- claws unsheathed. They didn't get too badly hurt, but they stopped when they realised Wishkit was bleeding everywhere. She panicked and so did Swallowkit, who ran off, Tulipkit with him. I was the the only one who stayed. "I'm getting Hollystorm," I told her, "Stay put."

From that day on it was *Sleetkit and Wishkit: Sisters of Adventure.* And I became Sleetkit: manipulater of warriors, maker of plans, Wishkit's faithful deputy. We were around three moons at this time, about the time Wishkit started talking to the wind. "She's crazy!" Tulipkit told me when she found out.
"She's brilliant," I countered, "It's like a superpower!"

I thought she was crazy. I thought I was crazy.

And then Wishkit fell.

* * *

H O P E

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The song returns.

I hardly notice at first. I'm in a fuzzy, sleepy, quiet haze, just letting my claws slip from the hard rocky ledge that is reality. Usually I love to sleep. *No, I'm not lazy!* I just enjoy dreams. I enjoy letting the arrogant wind that stings my long, thick fur slide away, and to travel into a land of reflected memories, unfamiliar faces and parallel world. A world mirrored like the sky in a frozen pool, where one false move could send it rippling away into oblivion. Now, I've been clinging on to conciousness for a long time. I can't leave my calm, almost painless world to a word that writhes and moans and seethes. I can never go back to the place where mud fills my mouth, my eyes, my ears, and my lungs and I'm sinking, further and further down. I can't do it. I'm going crazy.

My back and hind legs are numb and feelingless, as usual, as if made of stone. My front legs are weak and shaky, not strong enough to pull my tender kit belly across the ground. I'm skin and bones, so when I attempt to drag myself around, my ribs grind against the rough stone floor of my small cave. My face is gaunt and my pale eyes are sunken and grey. I'm too tired to look after my fur, so it is matted. The lack of sleep has got to me, for one reason only.

The blizzard is over and the clan have gone back up to the surface. I am alone, most of the time. Just by breathing, I send echoes backwards and forwards through the chasms, and icicles play mossball with the sound of my claws clacking on the rocky floor. There is no moss down here, like there is on the surface in the summer. In the summer, the snow melts and the wind dies down. The icy rivers and lakes trickle back into water, trees shake their branches free from frost and snow and flowers sprout. Tulips and late daffodils and Wolves' Tears and daises and so many other flowers, and moss, which is luxurious after a window of sticks, snow and prey feathers. Sometimes, we will find swan feathers

floating, derelict, in the Moon Mirror, a perfectly circular lake that mirrors the moon like a puddle. After drying in the sun for a bit, they line the nursery and elder's den. There are no swan feathers down here. I am sprawled awkwardly in a scratchy twig nest, with no feeling in my hind legs. And no moss.

I haven't slept properly, nor eaten since everybody left. Hollystorm only drops in once or twice a day, to bring me prey, which I never eat. I have not washed. The stench of crowfood sticks to my fur, which hangs loosely off my bones. My Clan has given up on me, and I have given up on myself.

Well, I *had* given up on myself. Until the singing began again.

I prick my ears. No, no. My mind's playing tricks on me. It can't be, can it? *There it is again*. Faint, quiet. Dying out, like me.

And then the singing bursts into a beautiful song.

It is passed backwards and forwards through the chasms, dancing backwards and forwards between icicles, sweeping my shallow breath away. The wind is gone, but the music is here. I can talk to it. It can talk to me. Maybe..... Maybe I'm not a hopeless case. Will everything be okay? *Will I ever be okay?* "Will I ever walk again?" I burst out. The song stops and darkness makes to unfold on my world again. But this time, when it reaches out to grab my vision, I wedge my paw in the way. "No. No. Listen to me, whoever you are, whatever you are. Will I ever walk again? Will I be released from this cage? Will I ever again lope through the forest, with the heavy autumn air in my lungs and the breeze singing through my fur? Tell me. Will I ever find myself up to my ears in glory and adventure, Sleetkit by my side, all the other kits.... Apprentices..... *Warriors*..... Gazing at me in awe? Will I ever touch noses with my mentor? My leader? Will I ever feel eight more lives enter my soul? Will I be the first leader to lead my clan all the way to the City of Dust and Dark? Answer me, song! Will I feel the sun beating down on my back as I hunt, my paws wet from The Thaw? Will I stare up at the moon one night? Knowing my Clan are safe in their nests? And when my soul drifts gently away to StarClan, will the kits tell tales of me? Of you? Of the wind? Tell me now, beautiful song. Will you let me make just one wish?"

Nothing happens.

And then..... *It* breathes the answer into my small white ear.

"Wishstar."

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H O P E L E S S

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"Wishkit?"

I jerk my head up, the content smile falling from my face, the comfy haze of sleep dragged from my body. When my pale eyes focus, I recognise Crookedpaw.
"What do you want?"
"Wishkit, are you okay?" His voice has a nervous tone.
"Of course I am. Waves of sunlight are radiating off my pelt, I'm so happy. I'm so full of joy that I'm skipping hand and hand with Smokestar and Shiverstar. Just by placing my paw on the ground, I can turn boring stone into fresh green grass. Yes. I'm just *jubilant!*" I spit at his paws and lower my head.
"You're sick."
"Oh, *really?*" My voice is thick with sarcasm. "I honestly hadn't noticed! Why, Hollystorm should appoint you her apprentice. You're on your way to becoming a brilliant medicine cat, you know!" My voice rises to a shrill shriek.
"Wishkit! How did you get it when you're down here and it's up there?" Crookedpaw frowns. I roll my eyes.
"Stay away from the sick cat. You're already catching her insanity. Back away and don't come back. The sick cat is going to rot down here, alone, and she doesn't care what you think about it. So get out!" I hiss.
"Did you go up to the surface?"
"My legs are shattered. Yes, I just danced up to the surface, didn't I?"
"Stop it. I'm being serious."
"No, you aren't." I let out a sigh. "You're a smart cat, Crookedpaw. You know I didn't go up there. I don't know why you're here. Go back up to the camp, okay? And stay there. Become a warrior. Find yourself a mate. Live a happy life, and just forget about me. I don't care." I shut my eyes again. "For one moment, I let myself hope. It was despicable of me. I heard the song again, and it talked to me.

Talked to me, Crookedpaw. It told me I was going to become Wishstar. But you just can't have a crippled leader. You can't."
"Wishkit. I thought you were better than this." Crookedpaw sits down. I shake my head
"Turns out, I'm not. Get your tail o-" I try to continue, but Crookedpaw interrupts.
"You were stubborn, brave, the leader of your band of kits. You were the roughest, the toughest, and I *saw* you fight. It's truly a tragedy that you fell. You could've been great. But Wishkit, you are *still special.* You're not a giver-upper. You're a fighter. And if you won't fight this, I'll fight it. We can fight it together."
"Crookedpaw," I sit up slightly and stare hopelessly into his eyes, feeling small. "I don't remember how to fight."
"I can help you remember how to fight. I truly believe that you can be someone really special." He gives an encouraging nod, but I shake my head again.
"Pick another kit. One with more potential. Pick Sleetkit."
"No, Wishkit-"
"She's strong. Tough. Obidient. Pick her, and she can be your special one. Let me go."
"Wishkit!"
"She can *walk.* Can I do that?"
"WISHKIT!" Crookedpaw shouts. I shut my mouth. Anguish burns in his eyes.
"Wishkit," he sighs, and my heartbeat slows.

"Sleetkit is dead."

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J O U R N E Y

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"No...." the word catches in my throat and tears fill my eyes. "Shut up, Crookedpaw. That's not funny!"

"Wishkit, it's true! I'm so sorry, but we couldn't save her. We couldn't save any of them. Oh, Wishkit, it wasn't just your sister. Other cats are dying as well.

They're being killed off, one by one."

"I'll tear that predator apart! Get me up on the surface. I want to destroy it."

"Wishkit, it's not something you can tear apart!"

"I just want to sit vigil with my sister. I'm allowed to do that. I have to sit vigil!"

"We buried all that was left of her."

"What?"

"Only her bones were left. She... well, let me tell you the story."

"What killed her? I'm going to strangle it! Maul it! Throw it to the wolves!" I have risen onto my weak forelegs. My joints ache, but my bones are charged with fire.

"Sit down and shut up! If you keep interrupting, you'll never understand. Let me tell you the whole story.

"It started the night we returned to the surface. Ravenfall came down with what we thought was greencough. But in the night... it got worse. Hollystorm could do nothing. I was asleep so I don't really know what happened, but at dawn, when I went to fetch something to put on my scratch, I saw him.

"Ravenfall was rotting alive. His fur had fallen out and he was slowly turning into sludge, like the snow on the side of the river bank in spring, and all we could do was watch and wail. At sunhigh, he was gone, practically a puddle. Hollystorm's beside herself. She won't talk, she just sits by the sick cats for their last agonising moments. She hasn't eaten in days, and she's the proudest, most independent cat I know. So far, five are gone. Four warriors, one apprentice. And... it's catching."

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It's catching... it's catching... it's catching.... Crookedpaw's agonised voice bounces off the cave walls, then rings in my ears. It sets in and my heart drops. BlizzardClan is falling, and soon it will hit the bottom. There it will break its spine and legs, just like I did. And down here it will lie, wailing for help, with only little crippled Wishkit to watch them melt to sludge and bones.The music will return, but nobody will hear it. BlizzardClan will be dead, and I will be dead, and Sleetkit is also dead.

My pessimistic thoughts obviously reflect in my eyes, because Crookedpaw places his tail on my flank. "Let's go."

"What?!" I spit, "What do you mean?"

"We have to leave! We can't die. Look, we'll take a few cats with us. Some warriors, Shiverstar, anybody who isn't dead. Maybe some kits. Who do you want to bring? Your mother? Your brother?"

"I'd rather leave them to rot, really."

"What about Sparrowkit and Tulipkit? You're friends, right?"

"Maybe Sparrowkit. Tulipkit? No way." Just the thought of the two kits reminds me of Sleetkit.

"So you'll come?"

"No way. I'd rather melt to death with the thaw and the rest of the clan than drag myself up a mountain, thank you very much!"

Crookedpaw looks down at his paws. Then he tilts his head up and

takes a step towards me.

"Please, Wishkit. We can train. We don't need to bring anybody. You know we're the most promising cats in the Clan. I just want us to survive."

"Since when do you care about me?"

"Since you got hurt." I stare at him and I know he is telling the truth. I drag myself around and turn my back on him.

"I suppose I shall have to accompany you on your really rather stupid journey to nowhere, to supervise, if anything." I raise my chin and put on my snootiest voice.

"Yes!" Crookedpaw gives a celebratory leap, then looks at my legs, twisted and useless. "But I guess you'll need to train."

"Make me an apprentice! Oh, please ask your mentor!"

"No way."

"What? Not fair!"

"You're five moons. It's against the code!" Crookedpaw shakes his head.

"Fine, fine. Teach me as a kit, so I'll be an even better apprentice."

Crookedpaw laughs. "That's the Wishkit I know." A cold wave of sadness hits me again. Sleetkit... If only she could come with me.

"The Wishkit you knew was bitter and mean. And she could walk," I add. To my suprise, Crookedpaw gives another chuckle.

"You change moods faster than a late summer breeze! Come on, Sleetkit will guide us. Let's start training tomorrow."

And, without a final word, Crookedpaw dashes away.

P R A C T I S E

< < < **C R O O K E D P A W ' S P O V** > > >

Drenched with sweat, eyes squeezed shut, tail thrashing in pain, Wishkit claws her way up the final stretch of the cave. She digs her claws into the soft earth, finally able to find a grip, and climbs for a few more foxlengths, with me nudging her flanks and lifting the dead weight of her useless, mangled legs. When the ground flattens out, I hear her breathe a shaky sigh of relief. I hop up onto the snowy surface in a single bound and take a large gulp of fresh, cold air. The snow is still falling, but it's no blizzard. "We're out!" I leap for joy and race around in the snowflakes. "Wishkit?" I slow down and walk back over to the steep cave tunnel. She's sound asleep, every muscle slackened, breathing peacefully once more. The snow lands on her nose but she doesn't wake up. Wishkit is dead to the world now, so I manage to drag her under a tree before trotting back to camp.

I have barely set a paw into the medicine den when Hollystorm springs on me. "Did you get her? Oh, please, please say you got her!" Her eyes are filled with anxiety and her tail is stiff.

"Relax, Hollystorm. Wishkit's sleeping under a tree. Have you got the travelling herbs? We're leaving at the new moon."

Hollystorm exhales deeply with relief. "Thank... thank... thank *you*, Crookedpaw. Thank you for saving her. I've really warmed to her, and I... I can't lose my apprentice again, can I?" She gives a weak smile and I stare at my paws. Cloudpaw had died a few weeks prior to the blizzard. "Oh, and I've got all the travelling herbs and some. I think I found a way to postpone the Melt for a couple of days, so I'll go and give that to Wishkit now."

"I'll gather some things to make a nest!" I smile brightly and bound off before she can respond.

I don't go to the Leader's den, where the moss grows. I don't go into

the forest to find sticks. I don't even go to the lake to find a duck's feather for luck. I go straight to the Warrior's den and seek out Pinedrift, my mentor. I spot her at the edge of the den, staring sadly at the prickly wall.

"Crookedpaw. Training later? I know I haven't been out with you her a few days, but I'm just so... busy." She gives a sigh and turns to look at me. Her eyes look hopeless.

"Are you okay? You look...." I drift off and stare at the ground. It's a habit now, whenever I'm in an awkward conversation.

"I'm fine, Crookedpaw. Just fine." She spits out the final word with a hiss and unsheathes her claws. I take a step back, my heart racing. She grits her teeth and sheathes her claws. "Hollystorm is what's irritating me. Not sibling rivalry... She's been acting funnily ever since that awful blizzard. We were closer than hairs on a vole's pelt, but now she's distant and quite strange. A sudden obsession with that Winterkit who fell down the chasm. Nervous and jumpy. And I know what it is." The fur on my spine begins to rise and my heart pounds.

"Hollystorm no longer believes in StarClan."

A/N Sorry! That was horrifically short. But there will be more chapters coming soon!